

SME of the Year – Winner 2017

David Miller Architects



Judges' comments

DMA have taken a unique approach to stamping their mark on the industry. Developing an inhouse Best Practice Management system has provided a comprehensive tool that drives continuous improvement in all elements of the business. The team has a strong collective desire to sustain a thriving business and have created an exciting, dynamic and progressive place to work.

Recognising that changes in market profile with large multidisciplinary organisations sweeping up all the work were a threat to their growth, David Miller Architects set out to disrupt the prevalent procurement ecosystem and find their way into larger, complex supply chains. They identified the adoption of digital techniques as a major 'disrupter' and, whilst change management is the biggest challenge to any organisation, as a small company they had the advantage for rapid and agile repositioning. Through their approach, they are creating new opportunities to develop expertise; increasing efficiencies in the delivery of built projects and unlocking a raft of client benefits. In addition, collaborative working practices are enabling other SME suppliers and supply chain partners to advance alongside and they are making strides to bring young people, women and under-represented groups into the construction sector.

In 2007 DMA was a microbusiness with only four employees. Today, they have a thriving practice of twenty with a growing portfolio of successes achieved. They have been able to demonstrate that a digital approach is a viable business model for small practices if they are to achieve future growth and prosperity. **For more information contact: 2017winner@ce-awards.co.uk**

Actions:

- Early adoption of a quality management system.
- Digital methods to improve their product – information is complete, coordinated and accurate, and therefore more valuable.
- Focus on security of delivery to gain client confidence and respect for their integrity.
- Effective and respectful professional relationships with contractor partners including Bouygues, Hill Partnership and Knight Harwood so that together with clients, they are all working towards the same goal.
- Investment in full-time R&D resource. Since 2010 annually invest £30k in BIM, hardware, software and training. Originally this was over 15% of turnover.
- Development of personal skills to create a team of excellent collaborators, communicators, analysts and synthesisers.
- Leadership training inspired by 'BlackBox Thinking'.
- Team input into business strategy and goals – project fees are developed and monitored in real time.
- Open plan office with a single central desk that everyone works at, including Directors, and regular changes are made to the seating plan. All project information is displayed on a 30m whiteboard.

Results:

- Year on year profitable growth with a gross margin of 51.7% in the last financial year.
- Operate a 3-year rolling business plan with targets for turnover; recruitment/resourcing; R&D; new sectors and client types; brand awareness/perception.
- Taken seriously when competing against much larger established firms. Reduced reliance on less profitable clients who do not share values and ethos.
- There is a clear correlation. Between income and DMA's investment in employee technical and personal skills, in particular their use of BIM.
- Whole team commitment to "make incremental improvements everyday through critical analysis of performance and working with clients and collaborators to do things better".
- Fully informed team with a sense of ownership and shared endeavour helping them to make 'right first time' decisions.
- Hosting workplacements (14 in 12 months) positively progresses staff development.
- CSR programme to mentor young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, gives the practice commercial benefits of diversity and provides leadership development benefits to the team.

Lessons learned/recommendations:

- Continuous improvement and a desire to create a forward-looking thriving business has directly impacted on customer retention and satisfaction levels (over 85% repeat business), low staff turnover, ease of recruitment and profitable year on year business growth.
- Digitisation, smart buildings, BIM technology and MMC all have a role to play in developing the future of the construction industry.
- Many young professionals have been weaned on technology and expect digital inputs to automate and simplify operational processes. The industry would be doing them an injustice if we didn't aspire to keep pace with evolving technology to push boundaries further.
- DMA will continue to champion BIM and share their project experience (both what worked and what didn't) openly. They believe that it enhances the capability of the profession to find new and better ways to solve market problems such as the housing shortage.

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